

Michael Lucas

Sermon at St. Benedict Church, Los Osos, May 11, the Fourth Sunday in Easter/Year C/ RCL

Readings from Lectionary: Acts 9: 36-43 Revelation 7: 9-17 1 John 10: 22-30 [Psalm 23]

The Drum and Lamb

Today's appointed scripture from the Revelation includes one of the more surrealistic, almost mushroom-induced passages John writes:

"Then one of the elders addressed me, saying,

'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?'"

The elder later states " ...these are they who have come out of the great ordeal, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb".

John's Revelation passage vividly recalls in me a work by the American composer Charles Ives wrote in 1914 that I first heard 45 years ago; about the time I started dating our pianist today... I love how the arts and especially music have a capacity to inspire and challenge our faith.

Ives complexity was drawn from a careful listening to the fullness of the multiple realities around us- hearing the world as the sonic collage it is- two or three marching bands heard simultaneously in a parade, fragments of bar songs, college fight songs, hymns, and quoting [or misquoting sarcastically] other composers tunes. His works do not seek to neatly resolve.

This particular Ives' piece is a setting of a Vachel Lindsay poem *General William Booth Enters into Heaven*. Booth was the founder of the Salvation Army in the last half of the 19th century, and who had passed the year before Lindsay's tribute poem.

The poem places Booth, blind later in his life, with a large bass drum leading a parade of those with disabilities, those who abused alcohol, the unhoused and forgotten marching them toward a heavenly village green.

The poem's stanzas are repeatedly punctuated by the question, 'Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?'

Ives sets the poem to a striking march beat by a bass drum matched with a cacophony of misplayed hymn fragments by instruments representing the diversity of followers.

In the fifth stanza
in a slow, hypnotic tune, a solo baritone voice reverently sings:

*Jesus came from out the court-house door,
Stretched his hands above the passing poor.
Booth saw not, but led his queer ones there
Round and round the mighty court-house square.
Yet in an instant all that blear review
Marched on spotless, clad in raiment new.
The lame were straightened, withered limbs uncurled
And blind eyes opened on a new, sweet world.*

And then he repeats:

“Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?”

I am told by beloved friends “that is not a comfortable image for Episcopalians”. But stay with me across several stanzas of reflection.

“Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?”

That phrase is not just rhetorical- it is pivotal to who Jesus is, the meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection, and a meaningful life today.

John, the beloved disciple, frames one aspect of the question in our Gospel reading. We are told Jesus is walking in the Temple during Hanukkah, the celebration of the re-dedication of the Temple following its ritual defilement 200 years earlier. He is walking in the Temple’s portico of Solomon- also known as the Porch of Judgements, the place where kings made pronouncements.

What irony and a foreshadowing of what is to come in the later Easter narrative of Jesus’ judgment and defilement by some leaders in the dominant cultures of Rome and Judaism.

Jesus is encircled by several Jewish leaders who ask

“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

Are they bona fide seekers or is this part of a cynical trap?

Jesus simply tells them ‘I have told you and you do not believe’

One commentator counts sixteen instances in the Gospel of John prior to this passage where Jesus says who he is, including:

He tells them: **“I am the Bread of Life”** (John 6:48).

He tells them: **“I am the Light of the World”** (John 8:12).

He tells them: **“I am the Door”** (John 10:9).

John continues with the metaphor of Jesus as the Good Shepherd to his sheep.

Not “a” good shepherd, but **THE** Good Shepherd.

It affirms his love and care for each of his sheep.

Jesus says: “The sheep hear my voice. I know them”

Jesus does not say “they know me” –

it is the more profoundly intimate **I know them**.

He then says “...**and they follow me**.”

I give them eternal life, and they will never perish”.

Some over-spiritualize the concept of eternal life from John’s Gospel as being in the future- we remain in a gap- we wait. Life is less meaningful. It’s all about the future.

It rationalizes our standing idly by while some are deprived of a quality of life we may impact here and now.

The Good News I hear is that eternal life is not only a promise for the future, but now, a permanent relationship that death cannot break. It is a quality of life in the present.

The Good Shepherd and Booth model for us what a shepherd **should** do for the sheep- we are called to support members in and out of our community turned away or forgotten by today's dominant culture- the widowed, the elderly, the invalid, the refugee, those rejected or scorned because of race, or ethnicity, gender expression, or identity... the people of today we could add to Booth's parade.

Who do you say that Jesus was? How is this life meaningful?

"Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?"

If we return to the Revelation to John, he witnesses an awesome event- a multitude from every nation, tribe, people, language, waiving palm branches as we did just a few weeks ago and all dressed in white robes, white for their having been washed in the blood of the lamb.

The use of blood here is especially visceral- we have all bled, felt pain, know of it as a key part of our bodily life.

One Ivesian simultaneous tune or meaning revolves around what some of our siblings refer to as *penal atonement*, or *substitutionary atonement*.

This atonement aspect has troubled me since my adolescent years in the Presbyterian church.

Words like "satisfaction", "ransom", and "paying the price" –sound like a transaction.

This seems to end the story with the death payment of Jesus.

Jesus as sacrifice assuaging a God who demanded justice.

My concern continues...was a blood sacrifice necessary for God to love us?

A second Ivesian simultaneous tune or interpretation is this:

the church in the earliest days following the crucifixion- before theology-assembled simply because..... He is risen! I find Good News in that!

"Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?"

In an Ivesian third simultaneous tune some contemporary theologians look at a **non-violent atonement**. They see those **atonement words** as misunderstood metaphors they point instead to a risen Christ as transformational. Richard Rohr suggests:

"Jesus was not changing God's mind about us; he was changing our minds about God."

Dame Julian of Norwich, whose feast day was this last week, was one of the first to discern there can be no wrath in God. If God and Jesus are not violent or vindictive, then our excuse for the same is forever taken away from us. **God is not violent, we are.** Our salvation is **from** redemptive violence **not because of it.**

Like the robes made white, **we** are to be transformed.

In this way, Jesus' death and resurrection is a divine epiphany -a pure gift of God's love.

Nothing changed by "payment" on Calvary, but everything was revealed as the gift of God's suffering love for us, so that we might change. **And all we must do is receive it,**

Receiving the gift releases bent shoulders, opens closed mouths, allows us to inhale deeply of this Holy Breath that has given life from the beginning of creation.

Accepting this gift begins a life-shaping transformation that can open new calls, inspire new visions, and bring about abundant and generous life. **That is our calling in this life.**

What do you make of the event of crucifixion and resurrection?
“Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?”

In our New Testament reading, when Peter is called to visit the house of the Tabitha, the Greek word used to describe her was *mathertria*, which is the feminine form of disciple- the only time that word is used in the Bible. But despite her faith she has died while Peter is in transit.

Peter asks the mourners to leave the upper room, prays, and then says in the Greek, *anastethi*, that translates as **rise up**.

This verb, in some form, is found over 100 times in the New Testament. Peter’s command, mirroring Jesus with raising Jairus’ daughter and Lazarus, is no different from our commonplace: Wake up! Arise! Stand up!

And we are told “Many believed in the Lord.”
Was it the power of the miracle, or were they attracted to a radical display of resurrection love that gives hope?

Tabitha’s rise, post-resurrection, in her real time, mirroring Ives’ simultaneous realities, suggests we rise join in praise with those robed in white **now**.

As Christians who live in the **now but not yet** reality of the kingdom of God, we have a particular charge to hold the world’s sorrow and the hope of redemption together, to recognize there is never one without the other. The ills that plague us, our families, our communities and our world might also be transformed by the love of a God working through us.

The resurrected Christ’s love continually calls us to rise.
It is always time to march, however seemingly out of tune or imperfect.

What a relief to know, like those first Christians, we don’t have to resolve the complexity or abstractions of theological debate.

We rise and march in the knowledge **He is Risen! Alleluia!**

“Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?” Amen.

Notes:

Vachel Lindsey’s original poem:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/12631/general-william-booth-enters-into-heaven>

Ives wrote several versions of his song- one played by piano and baritone:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7pLazBnvxo#ddg-play>

One scored for baritone, multiple choirs, and orchestra:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94uB9JI4xPA#ddg-play>

Julian of Norwich: *The Fifth Revelation*, Chapter 13:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52958/52958-h/52958-h.htm>

Richard Rohr on non-violent atonement:

<https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-nonviolent-atonement-2017-07-24/>